Collecting Historical Narratives of Five Village Women in Namibia

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Old Location Massacre, 10 Dec 1959
Introduction

• Five village women involved in the liberation struggle in Namibia
• How they were identified
• Challenges of interviewing and authentication
• Writing a Book “Tears of Courage”
• The outcome
Northern Namibia

• The background
• The war situation
• The dilemma of civilians in a guerrilla war
Historical Prejudices

• Personal motivation
• Skewed perceptions
• A learning process
Discovering the women

• Accidental discovery
• Snowball effect
• The common denominator
Finding the stories

• A long process leading from one women’s story to the next
• From Priskila
• to Drothea
• to Justina
• to Lahja
• to Aili
Discovering Gender Bias

• The women were never mentioned in history
• Women portrayed as nameless victims of political conflicts or faceless wives, mothers, child bearers
• Reality was very different
Authenticity and Earning the Trust…

• Finding independent sources
• Challenges of tracing people
• Authenticating and correlating archival sources
Authenticity and Earning the Trust…

• Selective memory and forgetting
• Prompting the memory unearths further detail
Authenticity and Earning the Trust ...

• Networking and accidental traces
• Overcoming reluctance and gaining trust
Authenticity and Earning the Trust

• Following further leads
• Tracking supporting evidence can be difficult
PRETORIA.—A 32-year-old married Afrikaner Ovambo woman from South West Africa, who is a witness in the terrorist trial in Pretoria, gave birth to a 6lb. 14oz. baby boy at the Holy Cross Maternity Hospital on Monday morning.

Mrs. Justina Hancock is among the 30 Africans flown in from South West Africa to be witnesses in the trial of the 37 alleged terrorists.

The nursing sisters have attempted to speak to her in German, which the Africans in South West Africa know, but she did not seem to understand it either.

She and the other witnesses are being kept in protective custody at the expense of the Government.

Mrs. Hancock's baby boy was still unnamed yesterday afternoon.

The baby is said to be in good health.

The presence of the woman in the hospital posed a problem to the nurses and hospital authorities.

Mrs. Hancock only speaks Ovambo and knows very little or no Afrikaans. Communication with her is thus difficult.
Authenticity and Earning the Trust

• Never ignore stories that are passed on through the words of a mouth.
• But use scholarly methods to investigate their integrity and research deeper.
• With each piece of evidence leading to the next.
Methods for Collecting these Stories

• Accidental discovery
• Unstructured open discussion
• Recording and learning
• Followed by systematic enquiry
Methods for Collecting these Stories

• Opening up to sensitive issues
• Do not embarrass interviewees
• Feedback
• Positive outcomes
Authenticity

• Pitfalls of oral histories of violent conflicts.
• Post-conflict re-styling of individual histories
Research Outcome

• Oral history as a healing process?
Research outcomes

• Historical narratives of women from below
• Lifting women out of obscurity into the mainstream of Namibian history
• Helping them gain recognition also in material terms
• Preserving the full story at trusted repository
Ethical Issues

• Despite national reconciliation...
• Naming “puppets” and “informers”?
• No easy answers
Conclusion

• Oral history is not told in one day, and not even in one month.
• Post-conflict research needs a setting that allows for the process of building trust and understanding, otherwise it will achieve nothing but scratch the surface.